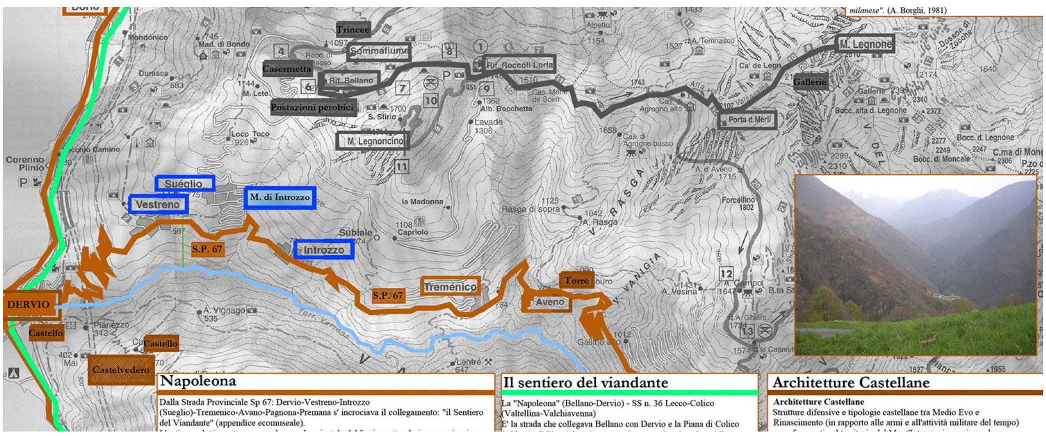
Imaging the Cultural Landscapes of Remote Areas. Storytelling, Fragilities and Future Scenarios

Marco Vedoà

Abstract

The paper deepens a recent research on the role of ICTs for cultural landscape in remote and mountain areas. It starts with a literature review on the notion of 'landscape' as a combination of social and cultural values, collective and subjective perception and the networks of relationships between man and the natural environment. In particular, it concentrates on the fragile mountain areas identified by *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* [DPS, Dipartimento per lo Sviluppo e la Coesione territoriale 2014] and analyses how landscape representations through ICTs can shape the idea people make of future scenarios and configurations. The research suggests a qualitative methodology that evaluates landscape storytelling, its effectiveness, its ability to convey landscape social and cultural values and to engage locals and visitors in the narration. Further, the paper deepens the implications of the images commonly proposed of mountain areas through ICTs, and how they can shape the idea local and external people may make about these areas. This aspect appears, in fact, relevant and able to influence decision-makers when imagining future scenarios. In particular, remote and mountain areas appear tied to an idealised image of the local landscape, which, as a fragile aspect, should be considered within the frameworks aimed at territorial regeneration and local development.

Keywords
Non-Outstanding Cultural Landscape; ICTs for Cultural Landscape; Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne; Fragile Territories; Imaging Remote Areas



Map of Sentieri Storici (Historical Paths) developed by Ecomuseo della Valvarrone. Screenshot of the web page <http://www.ecomuseodellavalvarrone.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Sentieri_storiciA.pdf>.

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Introduction

The topic of remote areas has been central in the national and European academic and political debate in recent years. From *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* [DPS 2014] and the European research project GeoSpec [Gløersen et al. 2013] on remoteness to the contributions of Antonella Tarpino [Tarpino 2012; Tarpino 2016], the scholars and experts of *Riabitare l'Italia* [De Rossi 2018] in Italy and Sergio del Molino [Del Molino 2016] in Spain, abandoned territories are becoming a relevant topic. For example, a significant part of *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR)* [PCM 2021], the Italian plan for integrating the Next Generation EU funds, is addressed to *'borghi'* to promote local development and regeneration. There is then an increasing interest in understanding which roles these areas may assume in the following years, considering the progressive and increasing movement of the populations towards urban and peri-urban areas. In particular, the focus is on rural and mountain areas, considered the most fragile and affected by abandonment.
Although interest in remote areas has been increasing only in the last few years, also thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, the abandonment of mountain regions is a phenomenon that starts back to the end of the 19th century at least [Tarpino 2016; Mocarelli 2017]. The obsolescence of the traditional mountain economic activities, and in industrialised areas, the better standards of life and economic opportunities have progressively eroded the social and economic capitals of mountains. Furthermore, abandonment appears to have brought territorial marginalisation. Depopulation decreased the weight and the political interest of these areas at the national level, excluding them from infrastructural development. Abandonment can be considered a constitutive fragility of remote areas [Chiffi et al. 2020], which cannot be solved only with an infrastructural adaptation. There are cultural and social aspects to consider, addressed to what opportunities mountain areas can offer and which the model may suggest in a world increasingly urbanised.
In this framework, landscape plays a crucial role. Considering landscape in its holistic notion that overcomes the monumentalistic view [UNESCO 2011; Sodano 2017; Salerno 2018], as a complex system of cultural and social values, the collective and subjective perceptions, and the relationships between humans and the natural environment [Alpine Convention 1991; Council of Europe 2000; Widgreen 2004; Antrop 2005; Nogué i Font 2008], suggests an interpretation model [Farinelli 1991] that deepens the link between local communities, tangible and intangible heritage and the transition to future scenarios. The representations of landscape, particularly for its sharing and imagination, also become crucial and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), with different tools and approaches, are the leading media today. Beyond digitisation, which mainly focuses on the preservation and documentation of the tangible and intangible, ICTs can offer storytelling of the cultural landscape, which shares several qualitative aspects, like the social and cultural values of places, the narration of the citizens' perspectives on landscape, local histories and stories. In addition, landscape storytelling provides the aspirations of the places and conveys the image of possible future scenarios. For these reasons, the image ICTs provide becomes crucial because it may influence how a specific area is perceived by visitors and locals and then shape the image of future scenarios. In addition, the contributions of Settis [Settis 2010; Settis 2013] and the Italian charter *Carta Nazionale del Paesaggio (CNP)* [Osservatorio nazionale per la qualità del paesaggio 2018] make this role appears even more relevant because they recognise landscape as a 'collective resource' that actively contributes to the citizens' well-being.
Besides ICTs developed with a top-down approach, like official interactive catalogues and maps at any administration level, there are bottom-up initiatives developed by individuals or groups of citizens [Bonfantini 2017; Villa 2017; Vedoà 2022]. In recent years, these initiatives have increased in number thanks to the appearance of free online applications devoted to building storytelling and offering narrations that mainly share the point of view of locals on landscape and heritage. Besides producing quantitative data (i.e., year of construction, the author, the style and the materials) of the local heritage, they collect qualitative information that shares the social and cultural values, how and why these features are relevant for local communities. Examples of ICTs developed with a bottom-up approach are websites, interactive

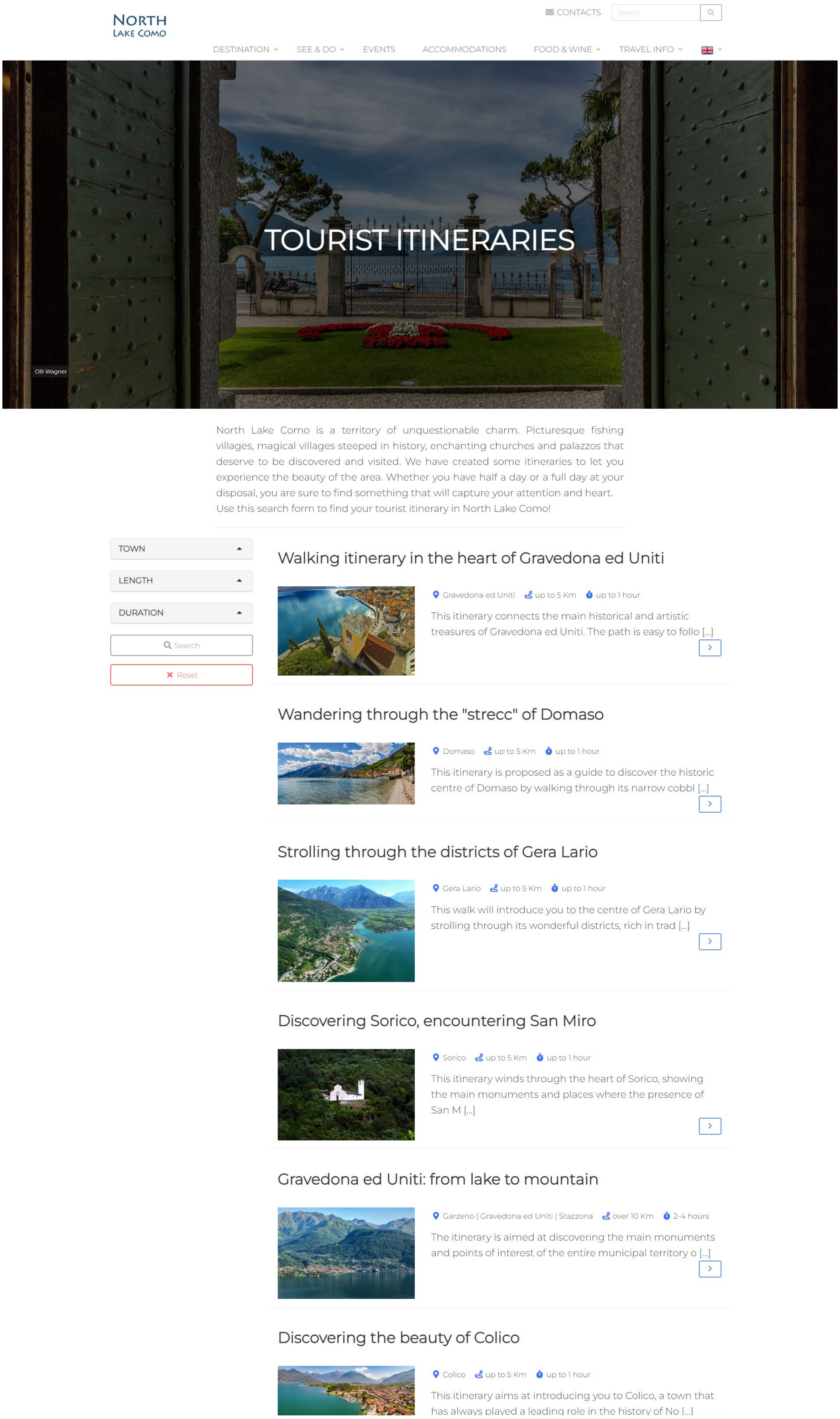


Fig. 1. The website of North Lake Como and the catalogue of trekking paths. Screenshot of the web page <https://www.northlakecomo.net/39-search-itinerari-turistici>.



Verceia Horse track

Verceia · up to 500 m · up to 5 Km · 1-2 hours

The *"Strada dei Cavalli"* (horse track), until 1834, was the only muletrack which connected by land the Valchiavenna to Lake Como. The name of the route comes from the pack horses that frequently used this route directly towards the north. The route offers wonderful views to admire the Pian di Spagna oasis and the Valchiavenna. The final part on the old unused state road which goes along the side of the Mezzola lake is also very attractive.

To get to the starting point you need to go by car along the SS36 towards Chiavenna; before the Verceia tunnel go left onto the old road, go about 400 m and you arrive at the carpark under the mountain.
Leave the car, go back down the road to the start of the Verceia **Tunnel**; just before the road joins the SS36, there is a **underpass** which leads you to the cycle/walk track that arrives at **Casello 7**, passing between the railway and the side of the Mezzola lake.
When you get to the **level crossing** (**1**), cross with care the SS36 main road, go around to the left where, signposted by a **totem**, the Horse track starts, it goes immediately up the side of the mountain. After about 100mts you get to the remains of the **house of the "Nona Pepa"** (find out about this lady by reading her story on the sign attached to the wall).
Just underneath, level with the road, there is the ***Dolzino fountain****, Monument dedicated to the Chiavenna patriot who in 1848 blocked the Austrian troops by pretending to have a cannon (in realty it was a tree trunk disguised).*
Wade across a stream and passing the stone protection nets for the state road underneath, we get to **Sasso Corbé**, a panoramic point over the Pian di Spagna with an info board.
A narrow passage between the rocks and a steep staircase brings you to the point where in 1613 Vespasiano Salis lost his life, (he was the mayor of Morbegno) and his servant, who fell of a horse falling down into the lake underneath. (Don't worry because now the path is secure due to parapets, protection and handrails).
Once past Sasso Corbé the mountain is now less overwhelming; in the area **Acquabona** there are the remains of watering place, just a little ahead you arrive at a junction: the left hand footpath goes down hill rapidly to arrive at the ex main road, while the right hand footpath arrives after a couple of streams at the hamlet of **Villa**.
The footpath intersects the road (**2**) and carries on left passing vegetable patches, fruit trees and fields. A short descent down stairs leads you to cross the **Vallaccia stream**; at the junction turn right passing by the side of the **"fontanin"**, a source of water that does down to the fountain in the Corti village. After you have gone past the **stream barrier**, the horse track ends going onto the track in the **Corti village** (**3**).
At this point you go left into **via Corte** passing between the old houses (*one of these has a religious fresco dating back to 1625*); At the crossroads go left on the road that goes in front of the cemetery to arrive at the **S. Fedele churchyard**, dedicated to the saint who was martyred on the other side of the Mezzola lake.
Go right onto the asphalted road until arriving at the **underpass** (**4**) that comes out on the side of the lake. At the left hand stop sign, go along the **lakeside** returning along the ex main road that goes away from Verceia. The last group of rural houses in **via Nazionale** precedes a short distance where you come into the tunnel.
Exiting from the tunnel look on the left hand side at the entrance to the Verceia ***Galleria di Mina - Mine tunnel*** *(5), built by the Italian army during the First World War, built with a main corridor split into the 4 sections with 18 branches, 16 mine shafts, a withdrawal shaft, 6 rooms, 4 cisterns and 3 ventilation ducts.*
The tunnel should have served to cut the road and train connections of the Valchiavenna, via a controlled explosion of a substantial amount of explosives placed in various points of the tunnel on the possibility of an attack by enemy forces coming from the nearby Switzerland (info: +39 0341 940322). After you have passed the level crossing you arrive shortly at the carpark, completing the ring.

(by "Associazione Pedaleggiando")

Details

Starting point	Parking on the old SS36 - VERCEIA
Arrival point	Parking on the old SS36 - VERCEIA
Minimum altitude	200 m
Maximum altitude	283 m
Length	4,5 Km
Duration	2h
Difficulty	Easy
Recommended period	All year round

Download GPX Track

Fig. 2. An example of trekking path presentation on the website North Lake Como. Screenshot of the web page <https://www.northlakecomo.net/235-I-tinerari-La-Strada-dei-Cavalli-di-Verceia>.

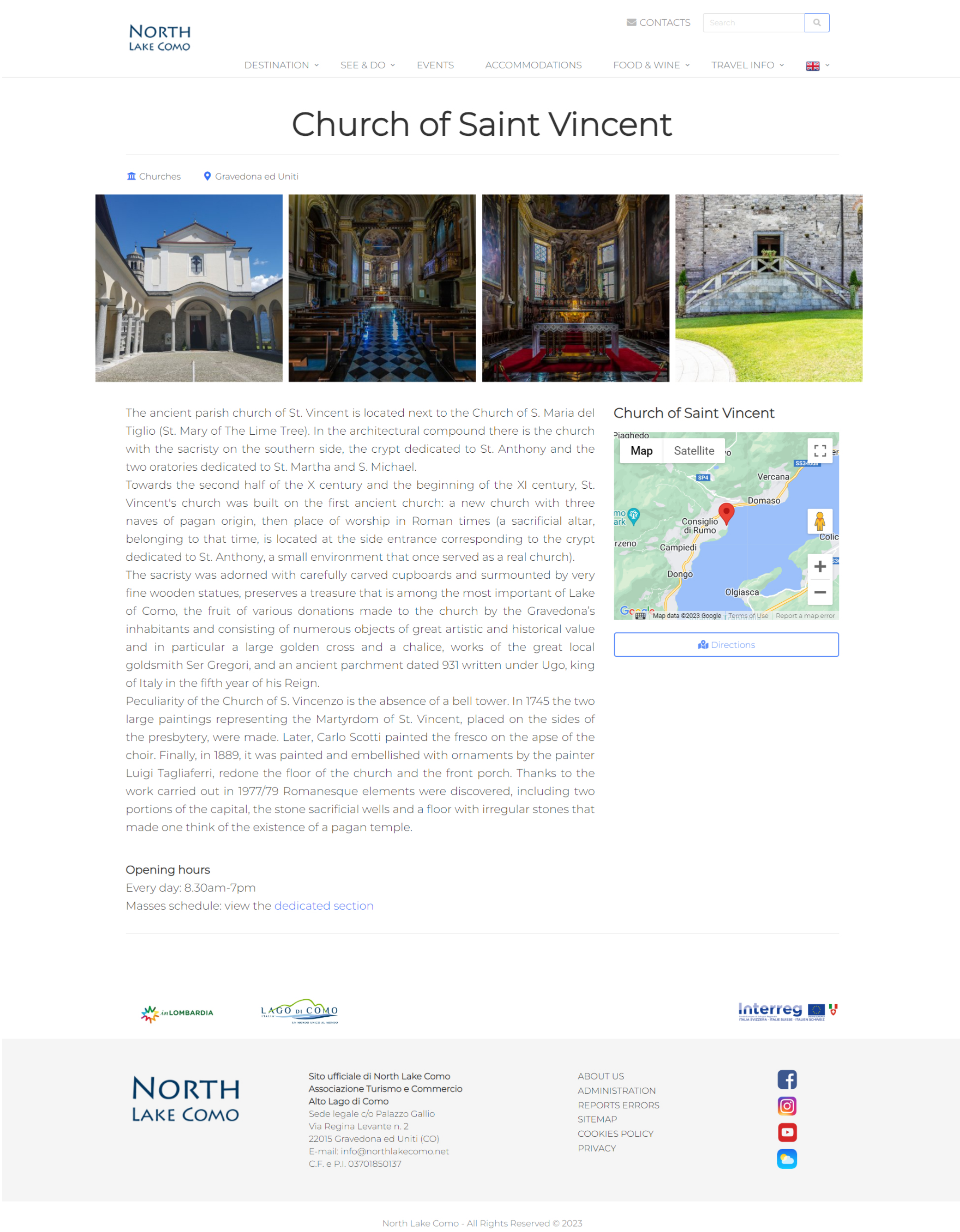


Fig. 3. The page of Chiesa di San Vincenzo with quantitative information on North Lake Como website. Screenshot of the web page <https://www.northlakecomo.net/182-Arte-e-Cultura-Chiesa-di-San-Vincenzo>.

catalogues and maps, multimedia narrations and even innovative immersive representations developed by ecomuseums, landscape observatories, individuals and local associations. Moreover, tourism consortiums and agencies that mainly gather public, private and third-sector stakeholders work on cultural landscape digitisation with the same approach. To promote local development through tourism, they provide landscape storytelling that narrates the tangible, intangible and natural heritage with different ICTs and from the perspective of local actors. Hence, they provide representations that indirectly show the aspiration of locals about landscape. ICTs for cultural landscape can offer a lens to interpret how local communities convey the image of their place to the global community and the collective perception of the everyday landscape. These representations inevitably bring with them fragilities that can influence the development of future scenarios and configurations. Analysing the image conveyed by landscape storytelling offers a critical perspective that can visualise limits and opportunities.

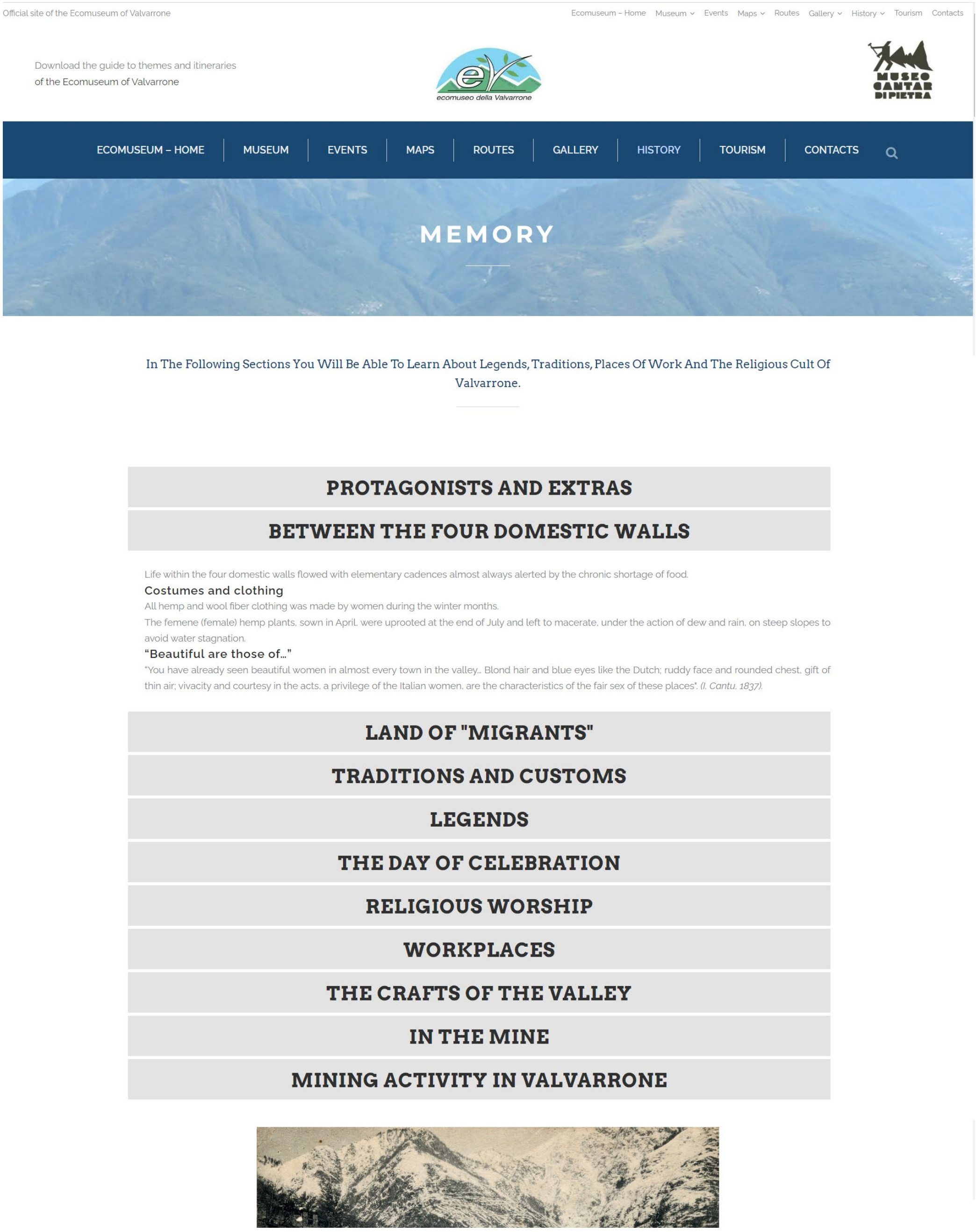


Fig. 4. The website of Ecomuseo della Valvarrone, the catalogue of local memories. Screenshot of the web page <https://www.ecomuseodellavalvarrone.it/biography/>.

A first framework to analyse landscape storytelling

The doctoral thesis 'The Role of Landscape Digitisation and Storytelling. Data and Storytelling to Shape Cultural Policies in Fragile Areas' analysed nine initiatives and digital tools within the six experimental areas of *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* [DPS 2014] in Piedmont and Lombardy Alps and extended its range to two further ICTs in two comarcas in the Catalan Pyrenees. SNAI appears to be a relevant framework to work in as it addresses policies for local development, primarily through tourism, besides infrastructural adjustment [DPS 2014]. Besides investigating the socio-cultural, economic and tourism background, the research suggests a framework to analyse the ICTs from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. The first comprehends the technical information, like the audience reached and the obsolescence of the tools and the network of actors involved. The second instead

GALLERIA FOTOGRAFICA
PHOTO GALLERY

Scheda d'archivazione n. 79
Dossier n. 79

LUOGHI DELLA QUOTIDIANITÀ
ORDINARY PLACES



Immagine *Image*	Fotografia digitale a colori *digital color photo*
Autore *Author*	Edo Bricchetti
Datazione *Date*	Anno 2006
Luogo *Place*	Latteria turnaria di Avano. *Community Diary in Avano*
Descrizione	Si tratta di edifici elementari in pietre cementate a secco come tutti gli edifici rustici della valle. Nelle *latterie turnarie* di Vestreno, Sueglio, Introzzo, Tremenico si lavorava il latte degli alpeggi, latte di vacca con il quale si preparava il *büter* (burro) in contenitori di legno con pistone (*zangole*) e il *furmac* (formaggio).
Description	*They are elementary buildings made of dry-laid stone, like all rustic buildings in the valley. In the community dairies of Vestreno, Sueglio, Introzzo and Tremenico, milk from the alpine past was processed, cow's milk from which büter (butter) was prepared in wooden containers with piston (churns) and furmac (cheese).*
Note	Si produceva formaggio grasso *bitto* (senza scrematura), formaggio piccante (latte di vacca scremato e in aggiunta latte fresco intero di capra), formaggio magro (scremato). Dai residui della lavorazione del burro e del latte di capra si otteneva, invece, la *mascarpa* o ricotta, consumata fresca o essiccata sull'asse del camino. Nelle latterie turnarie conveniva quasi tutto il latte della valle e lavorato in forma cooperativistica.
Notes	*Bitto fat cheese was produced (without skimming), piquant cheese (cow's milk fresh whole goat' low-fat cheese (skimmed). From the residues from the processing of butter and goat's milk was used to make mascarpa or ricotta, consumed fresh or dried on the hearth board. The community dairies collected almost all the milk in the valley and processed in a cooperative*

Fig. 5. An example of the dossier on cultural heritage provided by Ecomuseo della Valvarrone. Screenshot of the web page <http://www.ecomuseodellavalvarrone.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/galleria_fotografica079.pdf>.

deepens the innovations driven in the social, governance, economic and cultural fields, and the storytelling suggested. In particular, the research developed a first framework that analysed, on the one hand, the digitisation process: the documentation level, the integration in third-party databases and the ontologies used. On the other, it deepens how the storytelling is conveyed, its ability to: involve locals in the narrations, engage visitors in activities online and on-site, and share the landscape social and cultural values. Each dimension is also evaluated with a value between zero and four which is then represented through a radar chart to draw an area. A more extensive surface means a higher comprehensive evaluation and the directions of the chart, which of the seven dimensions has the highest impact.
This first evaluation framework furtherly allowed the comparison among the initiatives and, according to the socio-demographic and economic background, learning the possible

connections, best practices and possible guidelines. The research aimed to suggest guidelines to help developers and decision-makers from public, private and third sectors build and improve digitisation initiatives in remote areas. In particular, the research focused on the ICTs for cultural landscape developed by tourism consortiums, which aims for tourism development, and the ecomuseums that promote the enhancement of the tangible and intangible heritage through participatory processes [De Varine 2005; Riva 2017]. Besides identifying weaknesses and opportunities of the two typologies, the research could learn a further relevant aspect: how their goals influence the communication and digitisation processes and the image of the cultural landscape. Although this aspect could appear obvious, it is significant to consider, especially in the vision of future territorial regeneration and local capacity building.
Among the case studies, the experimental area 'Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario' in Lombardy is a clear example. Within the area, two initiatives show these differences: the local tourism consortium 'North Lake Como' (www.northlakecomo.net) and the local ecomuseum 'Ecomuseo della Valvarrone' (www.ecomuseodellavalvarrone.it). The tourism consortium mainly gathers the lake municipalities, the ecomuseum those in a lateral valley. The analysis of the landscape storytelling showed a clear difference in the digitisation process. The initiative provides a catalogue of the local heritage with general descriptions of the iconic tangible heritage of the area; it focuses more on leisure and sports activities. In addition, the intangible heritage considered concerns traditional agricultural products only in the vision of food and wine tourism development. In the same way, social and cultural values are rarely suggested. Landscape storytelling is more targeted to visitors' experience, and also, the participation of locals in the narration is limited. The evaluation chart shows a low storytelling capacity to engage locals and share landscape value but a high direction towards visitors' engagement. The objective of tourism development makes the initiative focus on narrating local landscape in this direction, shadowing the cultural heritage as a collateral part of the area.
In contrast, the ecomuseum focuses on the local tangible and intangible heritage and its relevance to local communities. Through the contribution of the local citizens, the initiative developed an interactive database where quantitative and qualitative information on traditional events, handicrafts, places and built heritage are catalogued according to a data structure. In addition, the ecomuseum created a series of thematic trekking paths for locals and visitors who want to discover the local heritage of the valley. In particular, the routes *focus* on the remains of the World War I defence remains and the local mineral extraction tradition. In this case, the evaluation chart draws a higher surface and has a clear direction towards sharing landscape values and the engagement of the locals and visitors. The narration includes, in fact, the contribution of locals, which were involved in a participatory process to collect qualitative and quantitative information about the tangible and intangible heritage and places. The aims of the ecomuseum – building a participatory process to preserve local heritage – are visible in the landscape storytelling, which privileges the documentation and engagement dimensions. The catalogue of the cultural landscape features comprehends detailed dossiers and web pages devoted to gathering quantitative and qualitative information about places, built heritage and traditions.
Besides these differences, the initiatives – analysed in these two cases and in the other nine – appear to have significant similarities that can influence the idea local and external people make about the area. These representations of the cultural landscape show the complex network of relationships among locals, individuals and actors, and the natural environment, how local capitals are intertwined with places. Promoting local actors and their activities appears to convey the idea of a cultural landscape that combines man's actions on nature and the social, economic and cultural relationships between them. In these ICTs, landscape storytelling appears able to enrich the narrations of the local heritage, highlighting the role of local communities and individuals. In the vision of a holistic notion of landscape that considers the perception crucial, this aspect enriches the experience, approaching it to the locals' perspective.
Nevertheless, landscape storytelling may represent a fragility aspect that can close the imag-

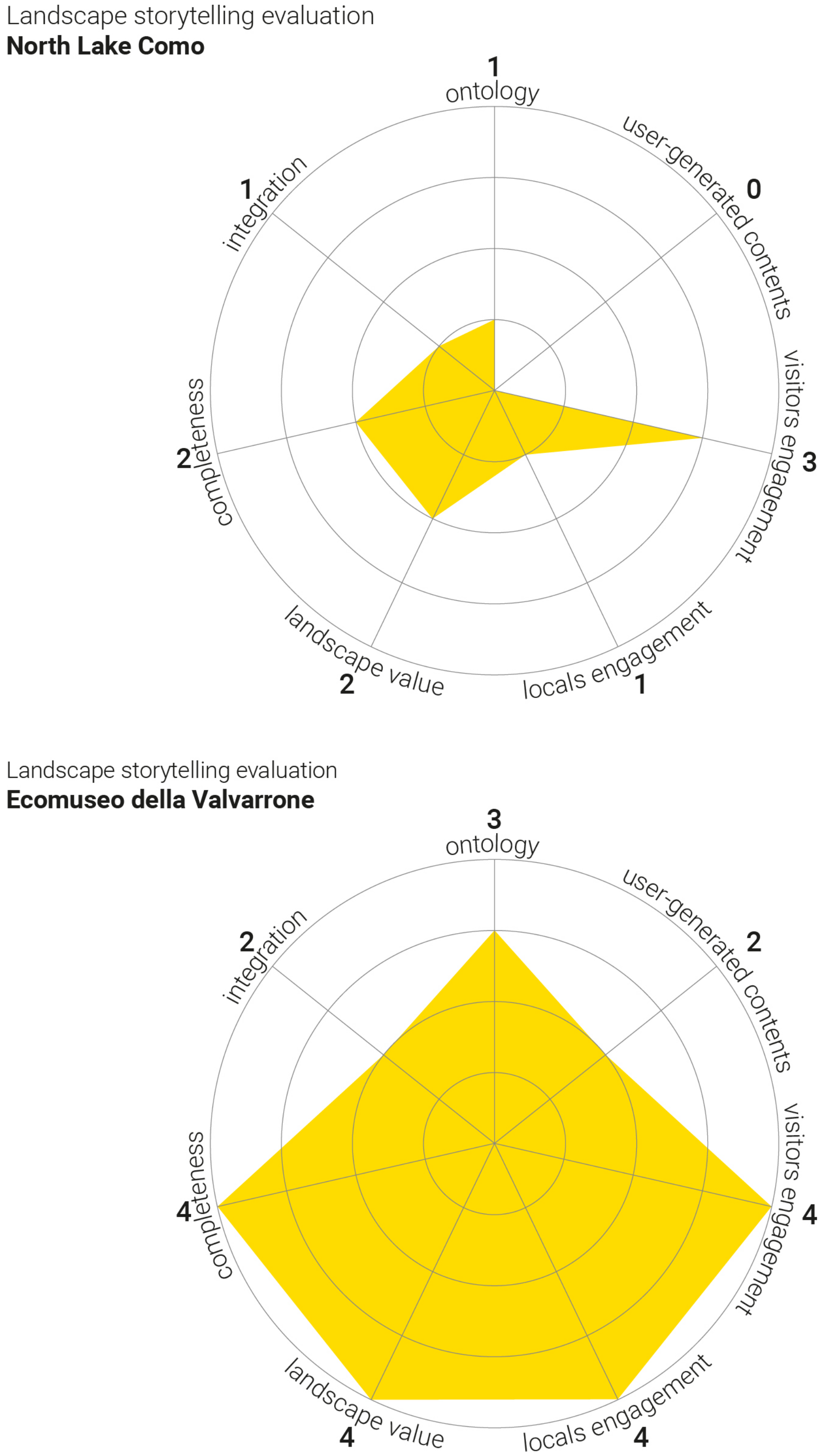


Fig. 6. The landscape storytelling evaluation chart of North Lake Como (above) and Ecomuseo della Valvarrone (below). Graphic elaboration by author.

ination of remote and mountain areas, and address the transition to future configurations. The narrations appear, in fact, mostly tied to an idealised place of rural and traditional lifestyles in the cases analysed. This image of the cultural landscape of remote areas, already highlighted by several scholars with the vision of *'borghi'* [Barbera et al. 2022], can limit the transition to different scenarios. There is the risk of conveying a banal representation of the cultural landscape that, similar to urban centres [Muñoz 2008] is homologating the

image and imagination of these places. In addition, considering tourism – even if declined in its cultural and sustainable forms – as the primary and inevitable approach to regenerate these areas can increase the idealisation and limit the imagination of future scenarios. ICTs risk providing an image of these areas as places for sports and leisure activities only without suggesting different opportunities based perhaps on other features of the cultural landscape. Furthermore, although tourism can push local development in remote areas, it appears unable to contrast abandonment, especially in destinations that are not historical and famous sports and leisure resorts [Brouder 2012; Andreoli et al. 2017; Bonadonna et al. 2020; Ibanescu et al. 2020].

Conclusions

The representation of the cultural landscape and its imagination is crucial, especially with ICTs which are today more pervasive than ever. As recognised by Widgreen [Widgreen 2004], people continuously read and interpret landscapes and their representations, shaping the idea people make of certain areas. Especially in fragile areas, ranging from remote mountain areas to the urban periphery, this consideration can influence not only the current image of places but also imaging its future scenarios. The cases analysed in this paper show such a limitation as there is an idealisation of the cultural landscape as a place of traditional and rural lifestyles in initiatives devoted to preserving tangible and intangible heritage and promoting sports and leisure activities. Suggesting a different image of remote areas could help the transition to a different idea of the cultural landscape of remote areas. In the same perspective, ICTs for cultural landscape should promote new visions and imaginations. Developers, local communities and decision and policymakers should consider overcoming such an idealised vision towards a more complex one that highlights local potentialities beyond tourism and typical products. This idealised image appears, in fact, to limit the transition to a different and renovated role of remote mountain areas in the future, relegating them as places for vacation and leisure. Suggesting new representations may offer new opportunities and different – and perhaps innovative – social and cultural models. In the same direction, policies and charters devoted to local development, enhancing and regenerating fragile situations like SNAI should focus on promoting a different cultural perspective that is beyond the banal image of *'borghi'*.

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Author
Marco Vedoà, Politecnico di Milano, marco.vedoa@polimi.it

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